Proposal to Expand Public Access Opportunities
Sycamore Canyon, South San Diego County, California
BLM Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office
10/15/2010

Purpose

The San Diego County Wildlife Federation approached BLM with a proposal to improve public access on BLM lands, known as Sycamore Canyon, located in the vicinity of Dulzura, San Diego County, California. The BLM had acquired these lands, totalling 2,817 acres, between 1998 and 2001 using Federal Land and Water Conservation Funds. Public access to these lands, since acquisition, has been limited due to fire restoration and resource issues.

Proposal

The BLM assessed access options for the Sycamore Canyon parcel and have developed alternatives involving both access points and route networks. The access points, identified as points A-D on the attached map, are described as follows:

1. Access point "A", located off Otay Lakes Road, is within the Rancho Jamul Ecological Reserve, managed by the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG).
2. Access point "B", located off State Highway 94, directly accesses BLM lands behind a gate locally know as the "pink gate".
3. Access point "C", located off the Marron Valley Road, directly accesses BLM lands.
4. Access point D, located off of the Otay MountainTruck Trail, is entirely within BLM lands.

Access routes throughout the area are also identified on the attached map by number. These routes, as well as the access points, would be designated as open, limited or closed to motorized vehicluar use based on resource, public safety or other issues. This plan would also identify parking and staging areas based on suitable site selection and location of the access points.

Location and Setting

The BLM Sycamore Canyon parcel includes 2,418 acres of contiguous land located along State Highway 94 near the community of Dulzura, in Southern San Diego County, California. The project area incorporates portions of Sycamore Canyon as well as adjacent hills. The unincorporated community of Dulzura, located along the northern and eastern boundary of this parcel, has a population estimated at 900 persons. Surounding lands are characterized as mainly rural or are managed for wildlife habitat protection purposes. The landscape is gently rolling with open flats and numerous dispersed boulder outcrops. Vegetation consists of coastal sage scrub and mixed chaparral. The Otay Mountains Wilderness area is located directly to the south of the parcel. Lands throughout the region have long been impacted by illegal immigrants traversing the area.

Relationship to Land Use Planning

These BLM lands are presently managed in accordance with the *South Coast Resource Management Plan* (RMP), completed in1994, available at web address:

http://www.blm.gov/ca/st/en/fo/palmsprings/southcoastrmp.html

The Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office is presently revising this RMP in order to produce a comprehensive and long-range plan for management of the area as well as address changes in resource conditions and needs since 1994. A draft revised RMP and Environmental Impact Statement will be available for public review in late 2010.

History of Land Acquisition at Sycamore Canyon

Southern California is among the richest areas of biodiversity in the United States. This biodiversity, coupled with declining habitat in one of the nation's largest and fastest growing urban areas, has resulted in more federal and state listings of threatened or endangered species than any other region of the country. The State of California addressed this issue through the passage of the Natural Communities Conservation Program (NCCP), a cooperative effort to protect habitats and species. The program, which began in 1991 under the State's Natural Community Conservation Planning Act, is broader in its orientation and objectives than the California and Federal Endangered Species Acts. The primary objective of the NCCP program is to conserve natural communities at the ecosystem scale while accommodating compatible land use. The program seeks to anticipate and prevent the controversies and gridlock caused by species' listings by focusing on the long-term stability of wildlife and plant communities and including key interests in the process.

The focus of the initial effort was the coastal sage scrub habitat of Southern California, home to the California gnatcatcher and approximately 100 other potentially threatened or endangered species. This much-fragmented habitat is scattered over more than 6,000 square miles and encompasses large parts of three counties – Orange, San Diego, and Riverside – and smaller portions of two others – Los Angeles and San Bernardino. Fifty-nine (59) local government jurisdictions, scores of landowners from across these counties, federal wildlife authorities, and the environmental community are actively participating in the program. The California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provide the necessary support, direction, and guidance to NCCP participants.

Also in 1991, the California Biodiversity Council was formed, consisting of more than two dozen federal and state natural resources agencies (including the BLM), the University of California, county boards of supervisors, and resource conservation districts. This is an unprecedented agreement to cooperate, communicate, and foster regional efforts to promote biodiversity conservation across administrative boundaries. To further these goals, the BLM in 1994 signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the City and County of San Diego, the San Diego Association of Governments, the California Department of Fish and Game, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for Cooperation in Habitat Conservation and Planning in

San Diego County. Under the policies of the MOU, the BLM agreed to a coordinated approach to incorporate BLM managed lands within regional habitat conservation programs.

To meet habitat conservation goals, BLM agreed to consider modifying its land use plans if these were found to be inconsistent with existing or proposed conservation objectives. In addition, BLM agreed to participate in acquiring lands to add to the proposed habitat preserve systems and to manage these lands to conform to the habitat conservation plans of the other signatory parties. From 1998 through 2001 and based on this agreement, the BLM acquired 2,418 acres of habitat lands in and adjacent to Sycamore Canyon in close consultation with cooperating agencies and using Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) monies. These acquired lands directly support development of the Rancho Jamul Ecological Reserve by CDFG. Numerous public ownerships in the vicinity of Rancho Jamul Ecological Reserve connect to provide a large core area of conserved land, including BLM's Otay Mountain Wilderness Area, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's San Diego-Sweetwater National Wildlife Refuge, CDFG's adjacent Hollenbeck Canyon Wildlife Area and various City and County of San Diego ownerships.

Resource Overview

Plants

Vegetation communities in the Sycamore Canyon area are coastal sage scrub and mixed chaparral. Typical plant species associated with these communities include: California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), flat-top buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*), black sage (*Salvia mellifera*), laurel sumac (*Malosma laurina*), coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*), bush Poppy (*Dendromecon rigida*), and golden yarrow (*Eriophyllum confertiflorum*). Coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*), California sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*), and a few Tecate cypress (*Cupressus forbesii*) trees are found along Dulzura Creek in the project area.

Non-native Invasive Plants

Sycamore Canyon has been grazed for over 100 years. Forage planted for livestock has contributed to an infestation of non-native invasive plant species. In 2005, monitoring was conducted in the canyon to assess the effectiveness of a seeding treatment that was implemented in 2004, for the purpose of controlling erosion following the Otay Fire of 2003. Seventy-two plant species were recorded in the survey, 36 of which were non-native. Over 50% of the treated area is covered with three non-native species: Red-stem filaree (*Erodium cicutarium*), Shortpod mustard (*Hirschfeldia incana*), and Slender oat (*Avena barbata*). Since the 2003 Otay Fire, the BLM has been attempting to establish islands of native vegetation within the canyon and to prevent, whenever possible, further spread of the existing non-natives invasive plant species.

Wildlife

Habitat for an abundant variety of native birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and insects are found in the project area. The following is a small representation of wildlife utilizing habitat within the project area: wrentit (*Chamaea fasciata*), California towhee (*Pipilo crissalis*), Bullock's oriole (*Icterus bullockii*), red-tailed hawk (*Buteo*

jamaicensis), American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), mourning dove (*Zenaida macroura*), California quail (*Callipepla californica*), mountain lion (*Puma concolor*), bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), coyote (*Canis latrans*), California ground squirrel (*Spermophilus beecheyi*), jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*), San Diego pocket mouse (*Chaetodipus fallax*), big-eared woodrat (*Neotoma macrotis*), western rattlesnake (*Crotalus viridis*), gopher snake (*Pituophis melanoleucus*), common kingsnake (*Lampropeltis getula*), western fence lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis*), side-blotched lizard (*Uta stansburiana*), western toad (*Bufo boreas*), pacific tree frog (*Hyla regilla*), Sara orange-tip butterfly (*Glaucopsyche lygdamus australis*), Behr's metal mark butterfly (*Apodemia virgulti*), harvester ant (*Pogonomyrmes* sp.), tarantula wasp (*Pepsis* sp.), pacific coast tick (*Dermacentor occidentalis*), honey bee (*Apis mellifera*).

Special Status Species

1. Quino checkerspot butterfly

The Sycamore Canyon parcel is within designated critical habitat and the Southwest San Diego Recovery Unit for the Quino checkerspot butterfly (Quino). The Quino checkerspot butterfly was listed as a federally endangered species in 1997. Critical habitat for this species was designated in 2002 and revised in 2009. A Recovery Plan for Quino was finalized in 2003. Population declines of Quino are associated with loss, degradation and fragmentation of habitat due to grazing, urban development, off-road vehicle activity and fire management practices. Collection and other human disturbances as well as naturally occurring events such as fire and weather extremes further diminish populations of this species.

Quino checkerspot butterfly prefers open grassland and sunny openings within chaparral and coastal sage scrublands that contain its larval host plant and adult nectar sources. The adult flight season occurs from mid-January to late April. The eggs hatch in about 10 days and larvae begin to feed immediately. They feed until summer, when their primary host plant, the dot-seed plantain (*Plantago erecta*) dies. The larvae undergo diapause during the dry season and the winter. The larvae develop through four instars, then pupate and emerge as adults in early spring of the following year. The adults live from four to eight weeks.

2. Coastal California gnatcatcher

Sycamore Canyon is within areas occupied by the coastal California gnatcatcher. The coastal California gnatcatcher was listed as a federally threatened species in 1993. Critical habitat for the coastal California gnatcatcher was designated in 2000. The main cause of population decline for this species is loss of habitat due to urban development, agriculture and grazing. Its habitat, coastal sage scrub, is considered one of the most endangered habitats in the U.S. The coastal California gnatcatcher is strongly associated with coastal sage scrub habitats between 820 and 1,640 feet in inland areas. The bird appears to be most abundant in areas dominated by California sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*) and California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*). The breeding season

of the coastal California gnatcatcher extends from late February through August. The breeding territory size of the bird ranges from 2 to 14 acres, with home ranges expanding from 13 to 39 acres during the non-breeding season.

Cultural Resources

The Sycamore Canyon parcel contains evidence of both prehistoric and historic occupation. Prehistoric sites range from small concentrations of lithic materials and pottery to extensive occupation areas with midden soils and bedrock milling features. During the ethnographic period, the area was occupied by the Kumeyaay. Archaeological evidence indicates the Kumeyaay have lived in the area for at least 2500 years.

European occupation of San Diego began in 1769. Portions of Sycamore Canyon were included in a land grant to Pio Pico in 1831 known as Rancho Jamul. The Rancho was later patented by Nellie Burton and sold upon her death in 1895. Eventually, the Rancho was purchased by the Daley family and renamed the Daley Ranch. Historic archaeological sites in Sycamore Canyon include the remains of buildings and structures associated with homesteading and ranching.

Recreation

Sycamore Canyon is within the Border Mountains Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA), as designated in the South Coast RMP, that encompasses BLM lands south of Interstate Highway 8 to the U.S. - Mexico border and from Otay Lakes to the Imperial County line. The current management direction for the Border Mountains SRMA is to provide opportunities for low-impact recreation and maintain a natural unmodified environment. No recreational facilities have been developed in the SRMA. However, the need for staging areas, trailheads, and easements across private land is evident due to an increase in recreational use, user demand, and the need for resource protection. BLM's goal is to meet these recreation demands while also meeting management objectives and commitments for habitat conservation.

The acquisitions of the Daley Ranch (Rancho Jamul) and the Clark Ranch between 1998 and 2001 provided improved access to public lands from State Highway 94 and Marron Valley Road. Previous to their acquisitions by BLM, the Daley and Clark Ranches were closed to public recreation use. Beginning in 1999, the BLM allowed public access to the portions of the Daley Ranch acquired by BLM, primarily the area known as Sycamore Canyon. The majority of the Daley Ranch was purchased by CDFG (Rancho Jamul Ecological Reserve) and is not open to public use except for special events. The BLM allowed motorized vehicle access into Sycamore Canyon on existing roads from 1999 until October 2003. The area was closed from November 2003 until May 2005 due to emergency fire restrictions and protection of post-fire restoration following the Otay Fire. Another fire burned within Sycamore Canyon on July 20, 2006 resulting in additional acres of surface and habitat disturbance. As a result of these impacts and the proliferation of human disturbances, the BLM again closed Sycamore Canyon to vehicular use by the public.

Wilderness

The 16,895 acre Otay Mountain Wilderness Area was designated in 1999 by passage of the Otay Mountain Wilderness Act, Public Law No. 106-145. Lands within the Otay Mountain Wilderness constitute the northern portion of the San Ysidro Mountains, one of the peninsular ranges whose southern half lies in Mexico. The area is deeply incised by numerous ephemeral streams. These streams have cut steep narrow canyons into the hillsides, and are the dominant topographic features of the area. Vegetative communities consist of Diegan coastal sage at lower elevations, with mixed chaparral and cypress forest higher up.

Preliminary Scoping of Issues

The following issues have been identified:

- Access from point "A" would require authorization from CDFG to cross lands within their Rancho Jamul Ecological Reserve. Any authorization would have to be compatible with the reserve management plan and address vehicular ingress/egress issues from the Otay Lakes Road.
- Access from point "B" would require development of turn lanes on Highway 94 and other vehicular safety features in order to provide safe vehicular ingress/egress from the highway onto BLM lands. In addition, development of this access would require mitigation of extensive cultural resources.
- Access from point "C" is the most feasible given a lack of vehicular safety issues from the county graded (disintegrated granite) Marron Valley Road.
- Access from point "D" is feasible; however, soils in the area are subject to becoming rain-soaked and impassible requiring better engineering and continual road maintenance.
- Routes #'s 044, 55a, 060 and 061 are located within confirmed occurances of Quino checkerspot butterfly.
- Route # 043 traverses private lands where no easement exists.
- Access between route #'s 62a and 41c (upper Sycamore Canyon) traverses private lands where no easement exists. In addition, road conditions within the private lands are very poor.
- BLM lands in the vicinity of access point "C" appear most suitable for a parking/staging area; however, additional cultural surveys and site assessment is necessary prior to selection.
- There is a history of a proliferation of OHV and shooting impacts once Sycamore Canyon is made more accessible to vehicular use.

Next Steps

- Complete scoping of issues by 11/12/10.
- By 12/1/10, release a draft environmental assessment (EA) on the proposal to the public for a 30 day review and comment period.
- Release a final EA/Decision Record by 1/15/11.